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National Assembly for Wales
Economy, Infrastructure and Skills
Committee
Regional Skills Partnerships

Evidence from NPTC Group of Colleges

Is the data and evidence being used by the Regional Skills Partnerships timely, valid and reliable? Have there been any issues?

The RLSP region is so large and diverse it is challenging to represent all vocational areas, and geographical areas within the RLSP, equally and fairly. Growing Mid Wales (GMW) is a cluster group who represent Powys and Ceredigion. The Network groups are limited in their membership and may not have the voice of all employers within the region, this can result in decisions around cutting FE FT provision and increasing WBL which does not reflect actual need and skills profiles of individuals at 16 -19. In some instances it has been seen that certain employers influence decisions they see is an area of need and is not reflective of the whole region. The EMSI tool which gives a much better reflection of local and regional needs and is linked to job vacancies across the region highlighting future demand. RSPs are in discussions with WG about using this with all Providers.

How well do the partnerships engage with and take into account the views of those who do not sit on the partnership boards, and how well do they account for the views of the skills providers themselves?

SW&M Partnerships are based on those that engage and may not have representation from employers from all of the Skill Sector Areas (SSA). Recommendations are made to reduce Curriculum delivery in non-priority sectors without the understanding of what employability skills are developed in these programmes, and the potential for progression onto HE or self-employment.

Growing Mid Wales has a different agenda to an area such as Port Talbot which has an anchor company such as TATA located within it. The Mid Wales Cluster Group is generally made up of representatives from the Public Sector (Health and Education) and SMEs / Micro businesses with very specific/bespoke skills needs. There is an opinion that GWM becomes a region in its own right to focus on the Growth deal.

The RLSP board has providers as members so their voice is heard and their contribution valued.

How do the key City and Growth Deal roles of the Regional Skills Partnerships influence their Welsh Government remit?

It may be perceived that too much focus and funding is linked to these highly populated areas to the detriment of rural areas and deprived wards. Some funding is being linked to Mid Wales Growth deal (£200 million) which is low compared to the 2.5 Billion City deals for Cardiff and Swansea. Poor Transport infrastructures from valleys and towns not linked to these deals increases the problem in growing the economy in rural and deprived areas in the Upper Afan/Swansea/Neath Valleys and Powys. A focus on these large slow burn deals prevents addressing smaller initiatives which will provide future employment. General inward investment within local authorities should be considered as part of the RLSP remit. Sparsity funding within FE allocations is vital to help support education and training in these regions.

Are the Regional Skills Partnerships able to actually reflect current and future skills demands within their regions? What about very specialised skills for which there may be low volumes of demand?

Depends on what research and development reports they are using to inform recommendations and decisions. There are many examples of SMEs in Mid Wales where bespoke training is required for very specialist roles. Hydrogen vehicle technology in Llandrindod Wells is an example. There needs to be investment in facilities that can be used to support low numbers and develop Higher Level Skills in specialised areas. This requires strategic thinking to identify skills that the workforce will require in 15 years time and will in some cases require a large amount of capital investment and match funding from the private sector.

Do the Regional Skills partnerships have sufficient knowledge and understanding of:

- a) the foundational economy and the needs of those employed within it

They have sufficient knowledge and understanding but due to the constraints of funding to support their work and the lack of flexibility within qualifications to support bespoke industries they may not be able to achieve the required outcomes.

- b) the demand for skills provision through the medium of Welsh

Demand for skills in the medium of Welsh is anecdotal and different for various areas within regions - Health and Social Care and Childcare Welsh speaking skills

are important in Carmarthenshire/Upper Swansea Valley, but not so much in towns such as Port Talbot and Neath or border towns in Powys. Public Services require these skills but this needs to be addressed through compulsory education at KS2/3 curriculum and Teacher Training programmes. If policy and ministerial priorities focussed and invested in training and development on the global skills needs that industry flag, for example, literacy, numeracy, resilience and confidence rather than GCSE resits and Welsh Language, employers would get more work ready employees (which is their priority) following their progression from FEIs/HEIs/Schools.

Are the Regional Skills Partnerships adequately resourced to fulfil their growing role?

The RLSPs are all funded to the tune of £150,000 annually – the SW&M partnership is funded via an allocation to Carmarthenshire County Council- not aware of how this money is spent to make a judgement.

Is there an appropriate balance between the work of the RSPs and wider views on skills demand?

RSPs do what they can based on the engagement of employers. For validity and confidence at least 60% of sector employers, representing the whole region and not one area, should feedback before recommendations on FE provision are made in that SSA, which includes sub-sectors which are often ignored. The current network cluster groups have a small % of the actual employers represented. Obtaining employer engagement is often challenging, some areas/ vocations are not represented.

Is the level of operational detail set out by Welsh Government for skills provision in higher/further education and work-based learning providers appropriate?

RSP reports used to inform FEIs /HE and WBL providers do not have sufficient intelligence and robust data to give confidence to providers that the recommendations are correct and take in to consideration the complexity of regional footprints. In addition vocational pathways in schools are not covered so decisions made are only relevant to FEI and WBL which defeats the whole objective of regional planning. In addition asking for small reductions means the potential for running economically unviable size groups.

If there are any, how are tensions between learner demand / learner progression reconciled with Regional Skills Partnership conclusions and the Welsh Government preference for funding higher level skills?

Demand for courses at L1 is still high in many sectors- The large proportion of school leavers not obtaining Level 2 threshold at KS4 shows there is a need for level 1 entry. Reducing L1 provision would increase the NEET population and access for many into a vocational route which will lead them to employment.

In addition many pupils have to enter at L1 to get the competency skills in areas such as Construction /Catering/Engineering. This does not exclude them from progressing to and obtaining level 3 it just might take them a year longer. Expectation of employers is high and often the best outcomes are achieved by allowing students to progress through the levels obtaining the wider employability skills along the way.

Learner choice remains key, careers education needs to start earlier so they can plan employment opportunities and therefore course choice for the future. Reducing the availability of some courses could enhance the flow into England for our Powys campuses.

Have the Regional Skills Partnerships and Welsh Government been able to stimulate changes in skills provision 'on the ground' to reflect demand?

Some changes have been seen where SPP funding has allowed providers to develop higher level skills curriculum and train staff to deliver these qualifications.

The direction of travel with skills development has started within the region in line with the RLSP requirements through working collaboratively with the other FEIs. However if small reductions are targeted it could mean running less economically viable courses. Re-deploying some staff in areas of great reduction would be impossible which would result in redundancies and specialist equipment/ space unused. More collegial work could be undertaken between WBL, Schools and FEIs providers to enhance progress.

What, in general, is working well and what evidence of success and impact is there?

A better understanding of employer need has resulted in more focused curriculum planning within the region. The development of Degree Apprenticeships and local higher education provision with employer input has been initiated.

Unit delivery and bespoke delivery based on employer requests has been enabled via the SDF project.

CPD/Industrial Placements for staff has increased as a result of SPP. Most Colleges have invested in Business Development Units and have developed detailed Employer Engagement Strategies which has enabled close working relationships with employers to meet their individual needs. FEIs have a wealth of employer information which should be shared and considered by the RSPs. This would ensure a wide as possible understanding of employers needs are met.

There has been improved collaboration between FEIs and the RLSP in the SW&M region via regular meeting with Employers to discuss curriculum and skills needs. This has helped the understanding of their needs whilst sharing the restrictions FEIs and WBL have regarding curriculum content, frameworks and the academic cycle.

Are there any aspects of the policy that are not working well, have there been any unintended consequences, and what improvements can be made?

Lack of consideration of School 6th forms/HEIs and private training providers from England as they are still allowed to deliver Vocational provision without the scrutiny that FEIs have. This has to be reflective of the activity of all post 16 training including Gen Ed programmes which can influence priority sectors especially in STEM. Schools offer Vocational programmes and are not asked to reduce provision based on RSP recommendations whilst FEIs are - this is not a level playing field.

Schools should engage more with employers to assist progression into careers. Respecting learner choice is also important so good and early careers guidance is imperative.

Wales is part of a global economy and we should not forget the opportunities that holds for youngsters, not all want to stay in Wales, so planning should reflect the wider possibilities other than the RSP region. This is essential in the border regions or there will be a larger flow to England for training and qualifications.